

## NO PLACE TO CALL HOME



ALICIA PRAGER

### *The Rohingya, Myanmar's Unwanted Minority*

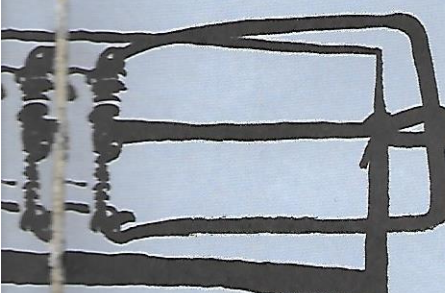
The sound of hawkers, bustling traffic, and laughter in the background make it difficult to hear Brights Hla Tin during our telephone conversation. The 25-year-old lives in Thet Kay Pyin, a camp for Internally Displaced People (IDP) bordering Sittwe, the capital of Rakhine state in Western Myanmar. Its inhabitants are Rohingya, a Muslim minority in Myanmar with South Asian ethnic origins who have resided in Rakhine state for centuries. Suffering from political, economic, social disadvantage, and extensive human rights abuses, the Rohingya are one of the world's most persecuted communities.

Bright Hla Tin attended school in Sittwe and planned to continue his education at university but when the 2012 riots between Rakhine Burmese and Rohingya Burmese broke out, in which almost 200 people were killed, his life was turned upside down. Following the escalated violence many Rohingya attempted to flee the country. Many others were forced into camps like the one where Brights Hla Tin lives today. Conditions in these camps are poor with a lack of adequate housing, sanitary and educational resources. Food is only available through NGOs such as the World Food Programme (WFP) and access to drinking water is limited. Children get very basic education, leaving future Rohingya generations poorly educated with little prospect of a better future. A temporary medical clinic is only open for two hours, three days a week. The medical care provided is minimal, with doctors deciding who they will see and paracetamol often being the only medication available. "We are not treated like human beings", Brights Hla Tin says.

The Rohingya are not recognised as one of Myanmar's 135 official ethnic groups, but instead are regarded as 'Bengali', a term used to imply that they are illegal immigrants from Bangladesh and not native Burmese. Obtaining Myanmar citizenship is close to impossible, leaving the community stateless. Neighbouring Bangladesh has intermittently taken in small numbers of Rohingya refugees, but overwhelmingly, almost a million Rohingya survive in a precarious, uncertain state, unable to obtain citizenship or form a state of their own. Being welcome nowhere, they are stuck in a situation which the International Organisation for Migration calls a "maritime ping-pong" between Southeast Asian states.

Bright is one of the 800 000 registered Rohingyas, of which 140 000 are living in IDP camps. About 700 000 more in Rakhine are not registered and therefore do not have access to support from international NGO's such as World Food Programme's supply, says Mohamed Ibrahim from the European Rohingya Council (ERC). Mohamed left Myanmar in 1990 to flee persecution. He sailed by boat to Bangladesh, and then to Germany where he lives today. He says that forced labour, arbitrary arrests, forced relocation, land confiscations, and restrictions of movement were common abuses, starting in 1942 with the Arakan massacres, where communal violence on both sides erupted in the power vacuum left behind by the retreat of British occupation. The number of Rohingya who have fled Myanmar is unclear but the ERC estimates it to be approximately two million. Taking risky journeys over the sea, the Rohingya have become known as Asia's boat people.





### *Aung San Suu Kyi: A New Hope*

In 2015, in a landmark moment for the nation, Nobel Peace Prize Laureate Aung San Suu Kyi was elected as the Head of State of Myanmar. For a nation that had been ruled by an oppressive military regime for decades it was hoped that this change in leadership would usher in true democracy. While positive changes have occurred, this has mostly been for the benefit of the majority Buddhist population. The situation for the Rohingya has remained the same. "I don't think that the government can change anything right now," says Ibrahim, due to the ingrained racism against Rohingya people and the remaining power of the military.

The power of the military in Myanmar politics is enshrined in the nation's constitution which mandates that 25 percent of the seats in both the lower and upper houses of parliament must be reserved for the military. This same document barred Suu Kyi from presidency, by its requirement the president must be someone who, "he himself, one of the parents, the spouse, one of the legitimate children or their spouses not owe allegiance to a foreign power" - Suu Kyi's two sons are British citizens. Also, it requires that a president must have military experience - she does not have this. Yet, that has not prevented Suu Kyi from attaining power. She took the position of the State Counsellor, making clear that President Htin Kyaw, whom she appointed to office, would act as her proxy.

Although she has attained power, Aung San Suu Kyi faces a high level of political opposition. The precarious landscape in which she must operate likely explains her silence on the issue of Rohingya discrimination. Overt support for the Rohingyas would be an extremely unpopular step and could weaken her position. In any case, real change will take time, not only for the situation of the Rohingya but for the country as a whole.

Nevertheless, the 2015 elections sparked hope within the Rohingya population. "Everyone in Myanmar has a lot of hope, also the Rohingya. Simply because we have suffered so much under the military governments," says Mohammed Rafique, a refugee who fled Myanmar in 1992, spent 17 years in the refugee camp Kutupalong, Bangladesh, before resettling in Ireland. However, he fears that Suu Kyi will follow the voices of "a handful of public extremists."

As the Rohingya community receives increased international support, nationalist Buddhist groups in Myanmar are becoming increasingly concerned about the possibility of granting more rights to the Muslim minority. In April of this year, hundreds rallied against international pressure in front of the US Embassy in Yangon, which had used the term "Rohingya" in a statement expressing concern following the death of dozens of Rohingya refugees at sea. For Rafique, the demonstrations show the huge challenge the new government faces: "fighting racism and supporting reconciliation with the inclusion of people of all races and religion." He does not expect to return to Myanmar any time soon.